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Cajun and Creole Treaters: Magico- Religious Folk Healing in French Louisiana

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In French Louisiana a treater is a man (*traiteur*) or woman (*traiteuse*) who heals various ailments by power of prayer, and laying on of hands, as well as by some basic medication (Boudreaux 1971). In the following pages I will examine treating as a form of “magico-religious folk medicine” that has arisen out of several centuries of acculturation in French Louisiana. A discussion of treating among Cajuns and Creoles is presented to provide insights into the various beliefs held by both Treaters and their patients toward the practice.¹ Treating is also examined within the context of anthropological literature pertaining to the subjects of ritual and rite of passage. Lastly, the decline of treating is discussed in accordance with similar research on Mexican-American folk medicine that provides an excellent cross-cultural comparison.

The specific origin of treating is difficult to ascertain. Magico-religious folk healing of this type exists in many societies. Yoder (1972) describes magico-religious folk medicine as using: “charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure disease.” At the macro-level, three of the largest groups in past and present Louisiana are European, Amerindian and African. The use of prayer or chants, herbal

1. Cajun refers to the white descendants of Acadian exiles that migrated to Louisiana in the later half of the eighteenth century, and became subject to acculturation with numerous other groups. Creole is the term used in southwest Louisiana for the Afro-French counterparts of this process.

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medicine, and laying on of hands is present in all three groups. In western Europe, for example, it has long been believed that seventh sons and children born with cauls have the ability to heal by means of rubbing, stroking or simply touching (Hand 1980). Parallel to European beliefs are those of Native Americans in the southeastern United States. Among some tribes, twins were thought to be born with unusual powers and were considered likely to become priests who use manipulation, herbal medicines, singing, and recitation of verbal formulas to treat various maladies (Hudson 1976). Regarding African healers, Laguerre (1987) has pointed out that many African medical and spiritual practices survived the Atlantic crossing. In the plantation system these beliefs continued because slaves frequently depended on each other for medical care. Thus, many different cultural traditions of spiritual healing exist in the New World, particularly in the southern United States and Caribbean. In Louisiana, such a complex human mosaic makes it difficult to trace treating back to specific geographical and cultural sources. The best assessment is that treating in its current form is a syncretism that has arisen out of several centuries of acculturation among the various groups in Louisiana.

Until the mid-twentieth century a majority of Cajuns and Creoles were rural, small scale agriculturalists. A shortage of cash and certain degree of both physical and cultural isolation made access to medical care difficult. During this time many people relied upon a traditional medical system, including treaters, for the care of minor injuries and sickness. The earliest description of treating comes from an anonymous manuscript that discusses nineteenth century Cajun social life. This document refers to "traiteur par le secret" or treater by means of the secret: "Almost everyone in the country has recourse to traiteurs for inflammation, erysipelas, angina, tumors, dislocations, whitlow, rheumatism, etc." (Ditchy 1965). These specialists were solicited to cure various afflictions through numerous procedures:

There are some healers who go to the bedside of one too sick to seek them out, some who cure with holy water, wax and signs of the cross, mixed with secret prayers. Others, more powerful, can stop all sorts of illness at a distance, notably bleeding from a wound or an operation (56).

Other treaters are described as placing more reliance on herbal medication:

Let us cite a fact: Twenty years ago, Mme. S. L., living four miles west of New Iberia, suffered for several weeks from erysipelas of the breast. She saw doctors without success. Much concerned she learned that a few miles away lived an able treater, an old negro named Zenon. Called to her, the empiric examined the diseased area and promised to cure it. But he needed simples. He was taken to Petite Anse woods, from which he brought roots, bark, leaves and so forth which he boiled and applied the result, still hot, on the sick area. Two hours later, the awful pain was gone as though by enchantment (57).

A more detailed narration from the 1930s describes a woman being healed of an inflammation on the hand:

Madame Belizaire's mother once developed erysipelas on the hand. She immediately called a treater, who began making the sign of the cross, omitting the amen. Then he surrounded the inflammation by putting the first finger just below the elbow. Without lifting the finger he made a cross while saying "Au nom du Pere et du Fil et du Saint-Esprit." Then he circled his finger halfway around the arm; there he made another cross saying "O resispere je te le conjure de saint esprit." Then he made another cross. He kept the finger going and made another cross on the first one, so as to interlock it. Never lifting his finger from the arm until the 3rd cross was made, he ended his treatment by making the sign of the cross in the air, omitting the amen (Post 1962:184).

Treating, as discussed in two of the above mentioned examples, is a form of magico-religious folk medicine. This type of healing differs from "natural folk medicine" that relies solely on herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substances (Yoder 1972:192). Although treaters may utilize both methods, it will soon be demonstrated that magico-religious folk medicine dominates among contemporary practitioners.

In the twentieth-century urbanization, improved transportation, and mandatory education transformed Cajun and Creole culture to the extent that many traditional practices have declined. However, despite the transformations, vestiges of a traditional medical system continue to function within the culture of French Louisiana. To provide empirical data for this paper, the careers, methods and beliefs of two contemporary Louisiana Treaters who utilize magico-religious folk medicine are to be discussed. The first Treater, T-Nom, a Cajun from Lafayette Parish in southwest Louisiana, is popular enough to have been the subject of a published interview in which he described himself as a "spiritual medicine man" (Hudson 1990). While

discussing his methods some basic guidelines arise regarding the practice of treating. According to T-Nom the ability to treat is a gift from God. He states that the gift, which has been in his family for four generations, was "passed" to him by his mother. Treating consists of prayers that T-Nom says are in his head and come automatically when he is confronted with an ailment: "I call my power a gift from God, because the prayers for each healing are stored in my head and come automatically. . . . To say all my prayers would take all night and half of tomorrow" (1b–2b). The prayers are recited silently over a patient, and coincides with a laying on of hands. Healing is supposed to begin in the thirty-five minutes following a treatment. T-Nom also uses some herbal medication for ailments such as the flu.

Two examples of treatments used by T-Nom are as follows. For toothache, a small nail is used to make a sign of the cross by the afflicted tooth three different times, with a fifteen minute lapse between each action. The nail is then buried in the backyard and the next day it will be rusted and the tooth will fall out. For sprains, prayer strings called "cordons" are used. Making the cordon involves tying knots in a string accompanied by prayer. The cordon is then worn on an injured limb. Of the two treatments discussed, the former is clearly an example of "transference" that is described as: "one of the commonest methods of ridding a person of disease . . . either by direct transfer or by way of an intermediary person or thing, into another person, a plant, or an object" (Yoder 1972:203). However, with the ability to treat comes certain responsibilities. The Treater cannot refuse a patient or the power is lost, and no payment can be requested although gifts are accepted.

T-Nom also claims to know "gris-gris" that he says is a form of voodoo. He refers to "gris-gris" as black magic and states that he does not utilize it because such practices are "not the Lords will." The concept of "gris-gris" and its relationship to treating will be discussed later.

T-Nom's reputation is widespread and he treats several people a night, some of whom come from out of state. Thus, it can be seen in this instance that the practice of treating is still considered as a viable form of healing among Cajuns.

The second treater, Pop Cliff, is an elderly Creole from rural St. Landry Parish, in southwest Louisiana. He also states that the power was "passed" to him by his mother, who received it from her husband. Passing of the gift to the opposite sex is a rule that holds true in most

instances of transmitting the power to treat. If a treater desires a member of the same sex to receive the gift, it must be passed by means of an intermediary such as Pop Cliff's mother. In Louisiana an example of the gift originating rather than being passed down occurs among Creoles such as Pop Cliff who believe that the presence of a caul or veil at birth represents a future ability to treat (Spitzer 1986). The belief in cauls as an indicator of special abilities is also present among non-French African Americans throughout the South (Puckett 1926).

According to Pop Cliff, treating originated in Haiti and diffused to the United States in the late 1800s. This statement does have some historical basis. At the start of the Civil War many free people of color fled Louisiana because they believed that a Southern victory would result in enslavement. At the end of the war many exiles returned to Louisiana, among them Pop Cliff's father, who had been born in Haiti, and had the ability to treat. Cliff explained that the practice of treating originated in Haiti due to a shortage of doctors. He stated that a recent Haitian visitor to his home reported that there are still treaters in that country. While treating undoubtedly came from Haiti with Cliff's father, it does not mean that the practice did not previously exist in Louisiana. The manuscript cited earlier mentions treating from a different area and at an earlier date. The historical connection between Haiti and Louisiana is of great significance, but has yet to be fully explored.

Unlike T-Nom, who occasionally utilizes natural folk medicine, Pop Cliff's treatments consist entirely of prayers and laying on of hands. All his treatments are performed three times, with a three or four minute interval between each episode. The sign of the cross is made before and after each prayer, and he closes by saying: "and the good Lord will do the rest." Cliff also utilizes the cordon for treating sprains or rheumatism. Cordons can be made for someone not present, provided the person's name and affliction is known.

According to Pop Cliff, a new moon negatively affects certain treatments, such as those for skin ailments, although the treatments are still effective. No explanation is given for this situation, according to Cliff's account it just happens that way. The significance of a new moon in the religious practices of African cultures is documented (Roberts 1986), but the extent to which such beliefs relate to the Afro-French of Louisiana is unknown. Another limitation involves family members of the treater. Although treaters can treat their

relatives, Pop Cliff states that a treatment conducted by a stranger works better. During Cliff's childhood, a neighboring treater was often solicited to treat members of the family despite the availability of Cliff's father.

Cliff can only treat for a specific problem identified by the patient. In order for a treatment to work, the patient must request treatment and describe the ailment. In one instance, a woman brought her child to Pop Cliff and stated that the youngster was suffering from worms. He performed several treatments, but could not alleviate the pain. The exasperated woman finally asked "How come you help all the other children but don't help mine?" A few days later, however, the child was hospitalized with a ruptured appendix that the mother had thought was worms. This example illustrates the limited power of treaters regarding diagnosis and treatment of ailments.

Whereas in some instances the process of treatment is shrouded in secrecy, neither Pop Cliff nor T-Nom make attempts at concealment. Pop Cliff's treatments, for example can occur with several people present or with just he and a single patient. Although Cliff recites the prayers silently during a treatment, he will teach them to any woman who desires to learn. This open policy is contradictory to many beliefs surrounding treating:

These prayers are shrouded in secrecy. No one other than the treater knows the words of this magical incantation. Part of the responsibility the treater accepts when he accepts the prayer is the obligation to "give" the prayer to someone else before he dies. This is the only person the treater communicates the prayer to. The recipient must believe in its power and swear never to tell it to anyone, except the person he will eventually select to succeed him (Leyda 1961:22).

Owing to the frequency of folk remedies that are similar to treating, it appears that some prayers and incantations have passing into the general population. In Vermilion Parish, Louisiana, for example, one cure suggested for excessive bleeding involves the following recitation:

To stop the bleeding, make the sign of the cross three times and say, "Oh (name the person who is bleeding), the blood which flows is as pure as the blood which Jesus Christ lost on the cross." Make the sign of the cross three times (Boudreaux 1971:126-127).

Thus, it is clear that some variations of the prayers used by treaters have diffused into the oral tradition of Louisiana and are utilized by non-treaters.

As it relates to black magic, treating is considered a distinct entity apart from the practices labelled as "voodoo," "hoodoo" or "gris-gris," that are said to cause harm. Unlike Haiti where Vodoun is a widely practiced religion, natives of southwest Louisiana use the term voodoo to designate black magic. Spitzer (1986) discusses both "gris-gris" and treating among Creoles, but makes a distinction between practitioners that seek to harm people, and treaters that prepare special amulets, or prayers to ward against black magic. As stated by T-Nom, "gris-gris" also occurs among Cajuns. One example of this practice is discussed in a recent book on Cajun French music. According to the account, a now famous Cajun accordion player was suddenly plagued by a mysterious lung ailment that the doctors could not cure. He was taken to a treater who told him that he had been "struck" by someone who had put "snake poison" on his accordion. The treater "put" a prayer on the accordion and washed it to counteract the poison. He then performed frequent treatments on the patient for three weeks, and concluded by placing a "prayer note" between the keys of the man's accordion. Shortly after the final treatment the musician began to feel better and eventually experienced a full recovery (Francois 1990).

Comments contradicting any connection between treating and black magic, however, are basically of the following vein:

When the question of magic or witchcraft was raised, my family immediately tried to negate such possible origins. The people involved in this practice are usually orthodox devout Catholics, and the idea that they are party to rites forbidden by the church is manifestly absurd to them (Leyda 1961:24).

The above statement holds true in all conversations regarding treaters. Both the treater and members of the community view this ability as a gift from God. This attitude holds true with Mexican Curanderos and Afro-Caribbean faith healers as well (Watson 1984; Laguerre 1987). The religious nature of treating is evident from previous descriptions. Frequent reference is made to the "Father," "Son," "Holy Spirit," and "The Good Lord." Despite the religious nature of treating, however, some instances of church opposition are reported:

"Later I learned that the old pastor, Msgr. Martel, had told my uncle not to treat people anymore because it was 'against the religion' " (Leyda 1961:25). Such opposition does not seem to be widespread, and for the most part treaters and patients ignore such criticisms.

Although it appears that most, if not all treaters are Roman Catholic, Protestants are not denied treatment. Neither is treating adversely affected by racial or cultural considerations. Black treaters see white patients and vice versa (Roberts 1923), and non-Cajuns and non-Creoles are permitted to seek treatment.

Treating can be viewed as a ritual due to its religious, transformative nature. Turner (1967) defines ritual as prescribed formal behavior not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers. Within the context of ritual, emphasis is placed on conventional, even stereotyped movement or postures performed regularly at times fixed by clock, calendar or specified circumstances, and having affective or emotional values (Rappaport 1971). During treatments a certain amount of repetition is involved, for example, a specific ailment requires the same treatment every time, and actions such as prayers and crossing occur in increments of three. The Treater is also invoking the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this fashion treating entails what Van Gennep refers to as "indirect rite":

. . . an indirect rite—be it vow, prayer, or religious service—is a kind of initial blow which sets into motion some autonomous or personified power, such as a demon, a group of jinn, or a deity, who intervenes on behalf of the performer of the rite . . . (Van Gennep 1960:8).

This statement is especially relevant in the case of Pop Cliff who as previously described, concludes treatments by saying: "and the good Lord will do the rest."

When a person is selected to receive the gift, he or she begins a rite of passage, that Van Gennep defines as: "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1969:94). All rites of passage are marked by three phases: separation, margin and reaggregation. In order to treat, the person chosen to receive the gift must learn the many prayers for various ailments, and agree to the obligations that are incurred as a result of acquiring the power. During this time the apprentice is separated from others by the fact that he or she are receiving information not available to everyone. A liminal phase is also encountered because the novice is not yet a treater,

but neither are they a typical member of the society. After someone performs a successful treatment, however, their lives are transformed. Despite economic or social standing, such persons are looked upon as someone who has received a gift from God:

The feeling tone which surrounds this custom is fascinating. People immediately begin speaking in respectful and awestruck words about the treateur, although as an ordinary human being the treater may command very little regard or reverence. Mystery and miracle-making are palpable in the air when people discuss treatment . . . (Leyda 1961: 23–24).

For the patient, undergoing treatment also marks a transformation. Someone who requests treatment must often go alone to the treater's home and put themselves under their care. When a child is treated, a separation occurs because the patient is surrendered to the care of the treater, and parents are limited in terms of participation. During the treatment both patient and treater are in a liminal state. The treater is in effect channelling the power of God, while the patient is on the receiving end of this action. Upon being cured, an individual returns to his or her family, and a better state of health. This positive experience causes the patient to accept the power of the treater. Thus, the initiation, based on such an experience, serves to reinforce traditional beliefs of the culture, and helps to enculturate a person into the group:

Initiation represents one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of humanity. It is an act that involves not only the religious life of the individual, in the modern meaning of the word "religion," it involves his entire life. It is through initiation that, in primitive and archaic societies, man becomes what he is and what he should be—a being open to the life of the spirit, hence one who participates in the culture into which he was born . . . (Eliade 1958:3).²

An example of treating as initiation and the relationship to enculturation was narrated by Pop Cliff. According to his account, a very sick young girl was brought to him for treatment. He treated the child, but then advised her parents to seek medical help because he had never attempted to heal anyone that sick before. Going to a doctor was not necessary because the following day the girl was better. She is now a

2. Eliade's use of terms such as "archaic" and "primitive" reflect terminology of over three decades ago. The terms are only used in this paper to retain the integrity of the original quote.

grown woman who brings her own children to Pop Cliff for treatment. It can thus be seen that belief in treaters is continually passed across generations and serves to facilitate transmission of the culture.

The examples of T-Nom and Pop Cliff demonstrate that treating among Cajuns and Creoles is still a viable, albeit endangered practice. Although treaters are still solicited, the practice is declining for reasons such as the availability of modern medicine. When discussing why fewer people solicit his aid, Pop Cliff stated that today nearly everyone has access to medical care through Blue Cross, Blue Shield and Medicare. Failure to transmit the power across generations has also led to a decline in the number of practicing treaters. Children often refuse the gift, or don't utilize the prayers that they learn. The former is very evident in the case of T-Nom, who has five children, none of which are interested in acquiring the ability to treat. Pop Cliff has passed the gift to a daughter, but the woman is a nurse in southern California and the extent to which she practices is unknown.

A recent study of folk healing among Mexican-Americans provides further insights into some of the processes that have contributed to the decline of dependence on magico-religious medicine in traditional cultures. As with Cajuns and Creoles, prior to World War Two a traditional medical system dominated among west Texas Mexican-Americans. Within this context, Graham (1985) discusses Curanderos who are:

healers par excellence with powers of divination. They are helpful not only in cases of illness, but also in instances of bewitchment that result in bad luck, matrimonial problems, alcoholism, and any number of other problems (170).

Curanderos, like treaters, are viewed as having received a gift from God, and are sought out in cases when home remedies or treatments by non-curanderos fail. Prior to the 1950s, Mexican-Americans in many areas depended on folk healers rather than medical doctors not only because of geographic isolation, but also because of: "high costs, modesty among women, fear or distrust of Anglo doctors and hospitals, and a belief in the superiority of the traditional medical system" (173). As with Cajuns and Creoles, however, rapid changes in Mexican-American attitudes toward institutionalized medicine have occurred, especially among the younger generations that came of age during and after the 1950s. Even older Mexican-Americans that grew up depending on curanderos have come to rely on medical doctors and pharmacies for much of their medical care. Graham attributes

this decline in dependence, especially among younger Mexican-Americans, primarily to formal education:

Getting a formal education is a strongly acculturating experience for anyone, and especially for those growing up outside the majority culture. A program of formal education communicates the values of the majority culture, particularly where medical science is concerned. Formal education challenges traditional wisdom as well as traditional values, and there is a clear and positive correlation between educational level and reliance on institutional medicine, and an inverse relationship between education and reliance on folk medicine (182).

Graham feels that curanderos are the first facet of folk medicine to be rejected by Mexican-Americans because it is the one that many younger, better educated members of the culture most closely associate with superstition. Thus, it is at greatest variance with the medical science taught at school. Even non-magical practices, such as the use of home remedies, have declined because although it is believed that they work, patent medicines such as Pepto Bismol are considered to be more convenient and more readily available.

Despite the decline in overall reliance, some dependence on curanderos continues among the elderly, those with less formal education, and younger people who have had past experiences which: "tell them that there is really something to these traditional beliefs" (187). Considering the example of the young girl treated by Pop Cliff, this also appears to be the case among the Cajuns and Creoles of southwest Louisiana who have undergone similar experiences in the post World War Two era. Such transformations provide a framework within which to examine the decline of traditional folk healing practices, not only among Cajuns, Creoles and Mexican-Americans, but in other societies as well.

To conclude, it can be said that treating is a form of magico-religious medicine that functions as both ritual and rite of passage for treaters and patients alike. Although the practice is in decline due to the above mentioned factors, treaters continue to play a significant role in the traditional culture of French Louisiana. This is due to the fact that treaters, as with curanderos, continue to be consulted by themselves, or in addition to medical doctors, particularly when modern medicine doesn't have a complete solution for a problem.

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